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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a study of the Success for All (SFA) reading program at two Mississippi elementary schools. In particular, the study investigated whether SFA was being implemented as advocated by its developers, students' reading scores on standardized achievement tests, how the program was monitored, attitudes toward reading, and what key informants said about the program. Mixed methods--qualitative and quantitative--were used to collect, analyze, and interpret data. Document review, field observation, surveys, and interviews were used to collect data. Findings revealed that adherence to the program's protocols, as designed by the developers, was only partial. Standardized achievement test scores of children in some grades increased, while the scores of children in other grades decreased. Since SFA's prescriptive nature controls teaching methods, children's learning experiences, and curriculum content, it was not surprising to find that teachers were less positive in their attitudes toward the program than were students and parents. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/RS)

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE SUCCESS FOR ALL READING PROGRAM

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Abstract: This paper is based on a study of the Success for All (SFA) reading program at two Mississippi elementary schools. In particular, the study investigated whether SFA was being implemented as advocated by its developers, students' reading scores on standardized achievement tests, how the program was monitored, attitudes toward reading, and what key informants said about the program. Mixed methods--qualitative and quantitative--were used to collect, analyze, and interpret data. Document review, field observation, surveys, and interviews were used to collect data. Findings revealed that adherence to the program's protocols, as designed by the developers, was only partial. Standardized achievement test scores increased for some students, but the results were inconclusive: the scores of children in some grades increased, while the scores of children in other grades decreased. Since SFA's prescriptive nature controls teaching methods, children's learning experiences, and curriculum content, it was not surprising to find that teachers were less positive in their attitudes toward the program than were students and parents.

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In response to increasing concern about the reading proficiency of students attending Mississippi's public schools, the 1998 Legislature passed an initiative stating:

> All children will exit Kindergarten with appropriate reading skills; All first through third grade students will demonstrate growth toward proficiency in reading to ensure they exit third grade as readers; All fourth through ninth grade students' reading ability and scores will improve; and Mississippi students will reach or exceed the national average in reading within the next decade (Mississippi Department of Education, 1998a, p. 5).

To meet the initiative's demand that students in grades 4-9 reach or exceed national norms, school boards, superintendents, and principals started purchasing packaged reading programs. Offering materials and scripted methodology for teachers, while claiming to be both whole language and phonics-based, packaged reading program developers are taking advantage of test-score mania to stake their claims throughout the state. Success for All (SFA) was one of the programs purchased. SFA is a prescriptive, comprehensive, and expensive packaged reading program.

By the close of the 1998-99 school year, 22 Mississippi elementary schools were using the SFA reading program. The number of schools involved in SFA doubled for the 1999-2000 school year. This brief research paper is based on a doctoral dissertation study completed during the 1999-2000 academic year that investigated the SFA reading program at two Mississippi elementary schools (Wells, 2000).

The Success for All Reading Program

Touted as a proven solution for children's low reading performance, SFA is the only comprehensive packaged reading program on the market. The program was developed by Dr. Robert Slavin and his associates at Johns Hopkins University. Although its developers originally designed the program to benefit students who rank in the lowest 25% in reading achievement, it is being adopted and used in elementary

schools in Mississippi as the general reading curriculum for all students in kindergarten through grade six (Slavin, 1998).

Guided by two essential principles, prevention and intervention, SFA is based on the premise that every child can succeed in learning to read in the early grades. Key components include adherence to a structured reading curriculum, supervision and coordination by a reading facilitator, cross-grade ability grouping of students for reading instruction, tutoring for children who need extra assistance, family involvement, eight-week assessments and regrouping of children. According to the program's developers, SFA is designed to prevent reading problems by providing children with an integrated approach to literacy that combines phonetic awareness, auditory discrimination, comprehension, and vocabulary building. Should a child experience difficulty in learning to read, the model provides for intervention in the form of one-on-one tutoring (Slavin, 1994).

Reduced class size is an important feature of the SFA reading program and is achieved by involving all certified staff in a three-day training session prior to implementation to prepare them to teach a daily 90-minute reading class every morning. Training is ongoing and continues after initial implementation through planned staff development (Cooper, Slavin, & Madden, 1998).

Cross-grade ability grouping is another important SFA feature. By placing children homogeneously across grade levels for reading instruction, children of similar ability are taught as one group in whole-class settings. Direct instruction is emphasized. Children are also encouraged to discuss stories, engage in sustained silent reading at home, participate in cooperative learning experiences featuring creative writing. Worksheets and other seatwork activities are kept to a minimum (Cooper, Slavin, & Madden, 1998).

Family involvement in children's reading is also given high priority. Parents and other family members are encouraged to help their children with homework in reading.

become volunteer listeners in classrooms, prepare reading materials, and provide general assistance such as helping in the school's library. Family support teams are also part of the parent involvement component. Composition of these support teams differ from school to school due to factors such as school size, attendance patterns, and socioeconomic status (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1994).

Research Design

The research design used for the study on which this paper is based may best be defined as a two-fold descriptive case study Two Mississippi elementary schools--one located in a rural community and one located in a university community--involved in the SFA reading program for two years comprised the case. Seven questions guided the investigation:

1. Are SFA procedures for implementation being followed as advocated by its developers?
2. What do standardized test scores indicate regarding the reading achievement of students involved in SFA?
3. How is the SFA program monitored?
4. What are teachers' attitudes toward SFA?
5. What are children's attitudes toward SFA in particular and reading in general?
6. What are parents' attitudes toward SFA in particular and their children's reading in general?
7. What do key informants say about SFA?

Mixed methods--qualitative and quantitative--were used to collect and analyze data. Investigative techniques included document examination, field observation, interviews, and questionnaires. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents served as subjects.

For the purpose of anonymity, the two schools comprising the case are referred to as Alpha Elementary School and Beta Elementary School. Throughout the

narrative, for the purpose of brevity , the word "Alpha" is used to signify Alpha Elementary School and the word "Beta" to signify Beta Elementary School.

Alpha is situated in a rural community in the Northeast Mississippi. During the time that the study was conducted, approximately 600 students attended seven grades, kindergarten through grade six. The racial composition of the student body was 85 percent Black and 14 percent White. Eighty percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunches and 12 percent of the students received special education services. According to the 1990 census, the population of the small city where the school is located was 3,267 (50% Black, 49% White, and 1% other minorities). The average personal per capita income was $8,262 (Bureau of the Census, 1992; Mississippi Department of Education, 1998b).

Beta Elementary is situated in a university town in Northeast Mississippi. During the time the study was conducted, Beta served approximately 1,000 students in kindergarten through grade two. Sixty-four percent of the student population was Black, 32% White, and 3% Asian. Fifty-six percent of the students qualified for free lunch and 11% of the students received special education services. According to the 1990 Census, the population of the town was 28,284 (68% White, 28% Black, and 3% Asian). Approximately three-fourths of the children attending Beta lived with families whose per capita income were above the poverty level (Bureau of the Census, 1992; Mississippi Department of Education, 1998b).

Discussion of the Findings

Findings indicated that adherence to SFA implementation procedures, as recommended by the developers, was only partial. For example, half of the teachers at Alpha deleted the reading of quality literature to emphasize basic skills due to pressure to increase standardized test scores. Sustained silent reading time at both

schools was abandoned in favor of spending more time practicing skills. Story retelling and dramatization was not observed at either school.

SFA strategy calls for teachers at every grade level to read aloud to children at the beginning of the reading period. Such strategy is based on the premise that reading aloud not only stimulates interest in reading, but also enhances understanding of the story, improves vocabulary, and facilitates knowledge of story structure (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1994).

Reading experts contend that reading aloud should start early and continue throughout the grades. The national report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985), stated, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children." Trelease (1993) adds that reading aloud is the pleasure connection--a linkage transforming children from school readers to lifelong readers.

Reading aloud to students, however, varied widely in the classrooms observed. Some teachers projected enthusiasm and interest into an otherwise mechanical, routinized program, while other teachers read stories with little thought to the relevance they held for their students and with little expression. Some teachers did not read aloud to students at all.

Half of the teachers observed at Alpha failed to begin their reading classes by reading aloud to students. Teachers who did not read aloud to their students appeared preoccupied with practicing isolated reading skill emphasizing phonics in preparation for standardized testing. Beta was a different story. There was only one instance in which a teacher did not begin the 90-minute reading class by reading aloud. Some teachers, however, said they had less time to read aloud to children since implementing SFA than before its implementation. The tight structure of the program appeared to influence this finding. Teachers are given little flexibility to make decisions since every instructional minute is prescribed.

According to SFA developers, the use of tutors to improve students' success is one of the program's most important features because one-on-one tutoring is crucial for the success of students experiencing reading difficulty. Intensive tutoring assistance is to be made readily available to students who need it. Tutors are expected to be certified teachers with experience teaching reading (Wasik & Slavin, 1993).

Certified teachers were not used at all for tutoring at Alpha. Classroom assistants (paraprofessionals) were used instead. Parents did not appear to understand the tutoring aspect of the program because 37 percent said they were unsure whether or not their child received tutoring from a certified teacher or was involved in any tutoring at all. At Beta, four certified teachers and 14 paraprofessionals tutored students. Beta parents were also uncertain as to whether or not their child was involved in tutoring.

Results of Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) given the children were analyzed to determine if reading achievement improved. Student performance was measured in terms of normal curve equivalency (NCE) scores. NCEs are derived from national percentile ranks and used in Mississippi to assign accreditation ratings. Student scores from the first year of the program's implementation were compared to scores made during the second year.

Achievement test scores in reading generally increased for students at both of the schools. Findings mildly suggested that students' reading performance as measured by such tests improve. Results are inconclusive, however, because while the scores of children in some grades increased, the scores of children in other grades decreased. Two years of children's experience being in the program appears too short a period for determining conclusive results.

Teachers were not positive in their attitudes toward SFA and did not prefer this approach to other methods of teaching reading. Their reasons for not preferring SFA

included: (a) encroachment on teacher autonomy by circumventing their knowledge and years of teaching experience--they felt the program's prescriptive nature locked teachers into only one way of doing things; (b) frustration about how the program denied attention to individual needs because an entire group of students is taught as one from the moment class begins; (c) little flexibility or time for classroom teachers to work one-on-one with student; (d) uneasy feelings about placing older students with younger students; (e) not knowing how each of their own students was progressing in reading since they did not personally teach reading to all of the students assigned to their classrooms; (f) pressure to stick to prescribed formatting even when they could see that students were not understanding the lesson; and (g) not enough time devoted to comprehension and story discussion. Teachers also felt that children's attitudes about reading had not improved since the program was implemented and that children, in fact, were reading less on their own initiative.

The majority of teachers at both schools reported that classroom libraries were inadequate and children were not frequently checking out books. Teachers at Alpha indicated that SFA books were not interesting or relevant, but said they read more literature to their students since implementing the program. Beta teachers said SFA reading materials were interesting and relevant, but that they read less children's literature since the program's implementation. The majority of teachers at Alpha, said students' attitudes toward reading did not improve with the SFA reading program. Kindergarten teachers stated that the program was developmentally inappropriate for the children they were teaching because the SFA thematic units did not fit the children's scope of experience.

Although SFA developers advertise their program as democratic in nature and emphasize the need for teachers to study the program, such as making site visits to schools using the program, prior to voting to implement it, most of the teachers said opportunities to carefully study it were inadequate. Eighty-nine percent of the teachers

at Alpha said they did not have an opportunity to observe SFA in action at other schools and 93% felt that they had insufficient time to learn about the program prior to making a decision to adopt it. Also 87 percent of Alpha teachers said that implementation was not what they expected based on how the program was presented to them. In addition, the majority of Alpha teachers said they had not received adequate training to teach the program. Likewise, the majority of Beta teachers said they did not have an opportunity to observe the SFA program in other schools prior to voting to implement it in their own school. They also did not have time to study the program prior to adoption, nor was implementing it what they expected.

Younger children (in grades K-2) were much more positive about the SFA and reading in general than older children. The program seems to have greater appeal for children at the lower elementary level. This may be due in part to younger children's general enthusiasm about beginning school.

Students in grades 3-6 were less positive in their attitudes about the SFA and reading in general than younger children. They did not prefer reading to other subjects, did not read at home, and did not like to tell the class about books they had read. Although the majority of students said that practicing reading is what makes a good reader, it should be noted that very little time in the program is reserved for independent practice; that is, reading for the joy of reading. Most students reported that they did not spend time reading outside of school for enjoyment.

Parents were the most positive of the groups surveyed in their attitudes toward SFA. Parents indicated that they liked the program because of its structure, scripted nature and homework assignments. Perhaps, parents like the program's very prescriptive nature because they're skeptical of teachers' qualifications to teach reading effectively. Parents also said their children's attitudes toward reading had improved after implementation of the program. Some parents, however, said they did

not understand the main aspects of the program, did not know if their child was being tutored, and were unsure of the cross-age grouping aspect of the program.

Reading facilitators at each of the two schools monitored the program's implementation and carefully supervised reading instruction in classrooms. Teacher behaviors are carefully scripted along with children's learning experiences and curriculum content. For example, signs are posted outside classrooms telling what lessons teachers should do each day so that the reading facilitator can easily check to see if teachers are adhering to the schedule and doing what they're supposed to be doing. Officials from the SFA regional center located at the University of Memphis also monitored the program three times the first year and twice the second year at each of the two schools.

Reading facilitators were more aware of the details of the program and how it affected students, teachers, and parents than were the principals. The principal at Alpha was hopeful that the program would generate more parent involvement and student interest in reading, but felt this had not happened. She was aware there was resistance to change from faculty, but that students responded well to the program. She also questioned whether the SFA trainers possessed the motivational skills and expertise necessary for in depth training. The principal at Beta provided little information about the reading program. She was not at the school when the program was adopted, knew little about the initial problems which were encountered, and did not closely follow its implementation.

Closing Remarks

In closing, it should be noted that the study's findings were limited to the case investigated--two Mississippi elementary schools involved in the SFA reading program for two years (Wells, 2000). The two-year time period investigated may not reflect

experiences that schools have with this program when they are involved for longer periods of time.

Another limitation pertained to using field-based methods to study phenomena. The presence of the researcher may have affected the situation being observed, thereby causing those observed to behave in some atypical manner. A final limitation was that over half of the data presented in the study was self-reported: what the subjects said about their own experience with the program. These measures may have told more about how the subjects wished to appear than about the true state of their attitudes.

Clearly, there is need for continuing research to determine SFA's long-term impact on children's reading achievement and habits in Mississippi, such as reading for pleasure. Two years of implementation is too short a period for determining conclusive results. Longitudinal research needs to be conducted to determine whether short-term gains are lasting.

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